D-Day: Heroic battle in Port-en-Bessin

As the 65th anniversary of D-Day nears, James Delingpole talks to the men of 47 RM Commando and visits the scene of their most heroic battle.

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Port-en-Bessin assumed a vital role in the Allied Normandy breakout because it was the destination for the Pipeline Under The Ocean.

If you're lucky enough to find yourself in the pretty Normandy fishing village of Port-en-Bessin on the weekend of June 6-7 and you spot a group of old boys in green berets in the seafront bar, for goodness sake stop and buy them a drink. They'll be there to commemorate the anniversary of one of the most magnificent British military exploits of the Second World War. When you hear what they got up to exactly 65 years ago next month you'll understand why they deserve that beer.

We all know the amazing Normandy invasion story of how the red berets of 6th Airborne Division captured Pegasus Bridge. But according to General Miles Dempsey, commander of Britain's Second Army at the time, the achievement on D-Day-plus-one by the gallant green berets of 47 Royal Marine Commando was every bit as impressive.

There were just 420 of them in all, and they had been given the near-impossible task of capturing this heavily-fortified, strategically-vital port from the same crack German unit – 352 Infantry Division – that would wreak such havoc with the American landings on nearby Omaha Beach.

Stand on the harbour wall, with your back to the sea, and you'll understand what a challenge these boys (aged mostly between 18 and 22) faced. Rising up either side of you are two mighty cliffs which, under Rommel's Atlantic Wall defence plan, had been honeycombed
with a fearsome network of trenches, mortar pits, dugouts and bunkers, guarded by minefields, barbed wire and even concealed flame-throwers.

Unless these cliffs (known in British military parlance as the Western and Eastern features) could be captured, the operation would fail.

The Royal Marines of 47 RM Commando were extremely fit, highly committed volunteers who had been preparing for 18 months for this operation. But despite their rock-climbing training in St Ives, and their beach landings on the Scottish coast, their CO, Lt Col Phillips, realised that a frontal assault from the sea would be suicide.

Instead, he decided, they would land 12 miles away on Gold Beach, then infiltrate behind enemy lines and sneak up on Port-en-Bessin from the rear. First, though, they had to get ashore in one piece. "The seasickness was appalling," recalls George Amos. "My memory is of sitting there, hands green with bile when suddenly there was an almighty bang as our landing craft was hit. You felt it right through. I was carrying a Thompson machine gun and a Bangalore torpedo, but when you're fully loaded you can't swim, so you get rid of your equipment. I came ashore with nothing."

Amos wasn't the only one. Some men landed without boots or even trousers. The medical officer John "Doc" Forfar (later to win an MC), lost all his surgical instruments; the heavy weapons troop lost their 3-inch mortars; and signals, their wirelesses. Worse still, the unit had already lost a fifth of its strength, killed, wounded or lost. Now, damp, shocked, and pitifully armed, they were expected to march on Port-en-Bessin.

Follow the troops' route today and you'll pass through gorgeously verdant, rolling Normandy countryside, dotted with orchards and lovely old farmhouses. In June 1944 it was much the same, only with scattered dead cows (killed by the allied naval bombardment) and the ever-present possibility that behind each innocuous hedge lurked a Spandau machine gun ambush. As Doc Forfar puts it: "Every bush, every bend in the road, every noise has a potentially ominous significance. You're alert the whole time."

About two miles outside Port-en-Bessin, you'll reach a wooded hill with a grassy crown covered with orchids called Mont Cavalier. It was here that the surviving men of 47 RM Commando spent the night of D-Day, the twin peaks of the Eastern and Western features brooding ominously on the horizon. They had supplemented their weapons with German Schmeissers and Spandaus, captured in firefights along the way.

On the morning of June 7, they had got safely through the outer defences and headed into the port when disaster struck. While clambering up the steep slopes of the Western feature, one of their troops was caught out by withering fire from two German Flak ships, which were unexpectedly moored in the harbour. Eleven men were killed, 17 wounded and one – George Amos – captured. Meanwhile, back on Mont Cavalier, the unit's rear HQ was overrun.

By the evening of June 7, the Commando was in a desperate position: isolated and under constant threat of counterattack from numerically superior enemy forces; low on ammunition, depleted by heavy casualties and exhausted after two days' fighting with no more than two hours' sleep. And still those impregnable features loomed.
It was gallant, no-nonsense Captain Cousins who found the solution. On recce patrol he discovered that leading up the side of the Eastern feature was an apparently undefended zigzag path. Under cover of darkness, he led a party of 25 men as far as he could go up the hill unobserved. Then, in true commando style, yelling, screaming and firing from the hip, they charged the enemy bunkers.

At the forefront of the attack was pint-sized Geordie Bren-gunner Arthur Delap. "When the grenades went off in front of us it was terrible," he recalls. "There were big flashes in front of my eyes. No pain, but my ears were ringing a lot and I was deaf and concussed for a few seconds. Then I started shooting again and after that they put their white hankies up and surrendered." Beside him, his much-loved troop commander Captain Cousins lay dead, after a selfless act of heroism that many in the Commando believe should have won him the VC.

The path is still visible today, as are many of the old bunkers and zigzagging connecting trenches of this once terrifying fortress.

And on the opposite side of the town, next to 47 RM Commando memorial on top of the Western feature, is the bunker where George Amos was held captive. Rather unnervingly, directly behind where he sat, was a poster advertising Hitler's infamous Commando Order decreeing that all captured commandos should be summarily executed.

"Because when they captured me I was tending my wounded Sergeant, the Germans thought I might be a 'sanitator' – a medic," Amos recalls. "By that stage I'd worked out that everyone was going to be shot except sanitators, so when they asked me to deal with their wounded I pretended to know what I was doing. Later they gave me a cup of acorn coffee and I went to sleep. Next thing I knew I was being woken up and the whole German garrison was surrendering."

In the months after D-Day, Port-en-Bessin assumed a vital role in the Allied Normandy breakout because it was the destination for the Pipeline Under The Ocean (PLUTO) which pumped millions of gallons of fuel under the Channel to France from the English coast. Today, sitting outside one of the fish restaurants that line the cobbled road by the inner port, you'd really never guess that so tranquil a resort could have seen such bitter fighting. Unless, perhaps, you saw one of those elderly green berets wandering past and took the trouble to ask.

"It's hard to convey what combat's like if you haven't done it," Arthur Delap says. "After my son had been to one of those games where you shoot paintballs, he said he couldn't understand how I wasn't hit. I said I just happened to be lucky. And I was better at shooting than the Germans were. But I still lie awake thinking about what happened all those years ago. I can remember every moment."